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The Promise of the Foreign:
Nationalism and the Technics of
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Vicente L. Rafael. *The Promise of the Foreign: Nationalism and the Technics of Translation in the Spanish Philippines*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 231p.

Studies on the origins of Philippine nationalism have sought to address, with varying degrees of emphasis, the role of economic developments, demographic and sociological changes, political movements, and discursive constructions in laying the foundations for the emergence of nationalist thought and action. The achievement of Vicente L. Rafael's *The Promise of the Foreign* lies in its defamiliarization of these leitmotifs, its ability to develop while also recomposing the leading, recurring themes of Philippine scholarship to produce a reinterpretation of one of the key questions in Philippine history.

Rafael is not interested in simply retailing the "figures of modernity" — the restructured colonial economy, the emergent middle-classes, print capitalism, 1872, the Propaganda Movement, Jose Rizal's *Noli me tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, the Katipunan, *La Revolución Filipina/Himagsikang Pilipino* — that both embodied and catalyzed the decisive social, economic, and political transformations from the late eighteenth to nineteenth centuries.

He is concerned with how nations grapple with the fact that they are constituted out of contingent historical forces (of which the above "figures of modernity" are convenient abbreviations) which are global in scope and therefore not necessarily confined to the particularistic bounds of the nation. This intimate but ambivalent relationship to the "foreign" is a fundamental feature of Filipino nationalism. Viewing their precolonial past through texts written by their Spanish colonizers, Filipino nationalists did not

define themselves by positing a "pure" indigenous identity that was profoundly distinct from that of the colonizers. Instead, they wrought their visions of community out of strategies of substitution and estrangement, "appropriating and replacing what is foreign while keeping its foreignness in view."

There is a reason why Rafael refers to this double process of substitution and estrangement as "translation." *The Promise of the Foreign* focuses on how nationalism's politics of inclusion and exclusion were underwritten by the "violent heterogeneity of the historical and the non-human agency of the technological." A crucial but much-overlooked property of anti-colonial nationalism is its reliance on "technics" of transmission capable of breaching the geographic, linguistic, and social barriers within an "imagined community." Foremost among these technics, and chief of Rafael's concerns, is language. *Ilustrados* (lit., "the enlightened") found in Castilian, the language of the colonizers, a medium that enabled them to communicate with each other regardless of their ethnolinguistic and regional affiliations. Castilian was also the language with which they spoke to, of, and against the colonial state. Equally important, it was the language with which they engaged the Spanish state and public in the European metropole. In effect, Castilian served as the linguistic medium of a nascent public sphere that was national(ist) as well as (for lack of a better word) trans-oceanic in scope.

Rafael argues further that, far from being merely a favored instrument of the *ilustrado* elite, Castilian also had a transformative effect on the vernacular languages of the Philippines. Rafael looks at the vernacular drama, in particular the *comedia*, with its declamations in a mixture of Castilian and vernacular, its settings in imaginary, "faraway" places, its battles between Christians and Moors (*moros*), and its non-native

costumes and props. Derided as “un-Filipino” by some ilustrado critics, this contaminated genre is in fact a preeminent form of staging the foreign, one in which the “colonial uncanny” transmutes what is foreign into something familiar and vice versa, and in so doing, reconfigures the categories themselves for political use. This explains why the missionizing/colonial content of the plays may be simultaneously affirmed and short-circuited by audiences who were primed to expect “alien appearances” in a local context but who accorded at best intermittent attention to these protracted performances.

It is perhaps no accident that Andres Bonifacio, founder of the secret society Katipunan, was said to have been interested in vernacular theater and even acted in the *moro-moros*. The Katipunan appropriated Castilian—for instance, the term *pacto de sangre* (blood compact)—and invested it with meanings beyond colonial apprehension and the purview of colonial authority. By detaching Castilian from its accepted referents, fellow conspirators—and the Spaniards—saw in Castilian an index to hidden sources of power capable of forcing the revolutionary equation of “Filipino freedom” with “Spanish death.”

Because language is rooted in communities of speakers but remains the property of no one individual, because the contexts in which it is spoken and understood are shaped by the vagaries of time, circumstance, and individual capacities and inclinations, communication and its effects are neither predictable nor transparent nor necessarily harmonious. If Castilian offered the possibility of communication and creation of commonalities across boundaries and allowed nationalists, invoking “Free Europe” (as Rizal did), to claim themselves equal if not superior to the Spanish colonial authorities, it created as well internal hierarchies and generated exclusions that carried the risk of failure of communication, the failure to establish a common ground

for debate and action among Filipinos (this failure, too, would haunt nationalist efforts at promoting Tagalog in place of Castilian). If Castilian provoked violent reprisal from the Spaniards who viewed the Filipinos’ claim to Castilian as a threat to the colonial dispensation, its violent othering by nationalism as the language of colonial privilege also carried the risk of nationalist vengeance itself “spiraling out of control” into death unredeemed by sacrifice.

While the potential but incalculable political effects of language use and transmission are the main concern of the book, Rafael does not confine himself to the linguistic domain. He repeatedly alludes to the communicative reach and scope of “analogous” phenomena as diverse as money, the telegraph, the subversive, and the secret society. Capital, technology, *filibustero*, and organization—like language—blur the divide between human and *techne*, often to the point that they become a kind of “second nature”: this is how “Chinese” can become synonymous with money and why someone like Jose Rizal paid with his life for his public reputation as a subversive. Like language, they are subject to multiple uses (and abuses) while also exceeding the wishes and intentions of those, whether colonizer or colonized, who deploy them.

While the issue of how “foreign” Castilian remained to Filipinos after nearly four centuries of interaction between colonizer and colonized (surely the answer is that Castilian ran the whole gamut from mother tongue of a few to second language of some to a language that, at its minimum, many could “fish” from, to use the suggestive metaphor from Rafael’s first book, *Contracting Colonialism*) has been raised by Benedict Anderson and Ramon Guillermo, the idea of nationalism-as-translation works best when the “foreign” is not assumed to lodge in Castilian per se, but rather, results from the “colonial uncanny” process of familiarization and defamil-

iarization whereby what is “foreign” can become naturalized and what is taken as natural can become “foreign.”

The Promise of the Foreign invites readers to reflect on questions regarding the possibilities and limits of freedom and community, the by-words of nationalist discourse and practice. Rafael writes about the origins of Filipino nationalism more than a hundred years into the “future” of that past, in the shadow of a Philippines troubled by deep economic inequality and social divisions. His project is shaped by the reality of a compromised nation in perennial political and social crisis. The radical potential unleashed by the Philippine revolution was “recolonized” by the Filipino elite at Malolos and repressed or else rechanneled into “democratic tutelage” by American colonialism. Yet, for all that the Philippines has not witnessed the thoroughgoing, redistributive transformation promised by nationalism, the dissemination of Tagalog-based Filipino by market forces alongside its promotion by the Left over the last twenty years points to the formation of a national, and globally dispersed, lingua franca, the political possibilities of which may be exploited or maximized for different ends, including progressive ones. In this sense, “the promise of the foreign” is meant to be read ironically: its declaration of expectation, assurance, and commitment acquires a redoubled sense of urgency—tantamount to an incitement to think and act—precisely because the “future” it foretells is so fragile, so fraught with risk and hope.

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Mark Bray and Seng Bunly. *Balancing the Books: Household Financing of Basic Education in Cambodia*. CERC Monograph Series No. 4. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, University of Hong Kong, 2005, 113p.

Provision of basic education free of charge is usually seen as both a government responsibility, because everyone has the right to at least a basic education, and an investment in the people. It is strange therefore that more than three million children in Southeast Asia do not attend school, according to the 2008 Unesco Education for All Global Monitoring Report. This is because governments of less-developed countries have great difficulties in financing education. Powerful economic and social arguments have been made about how to meet the costs of schooling and how to balance the financing of education. *Balancing the Books: Household Financing of Basic Education in Cambodia* is a handy book written by Mark Bray, Professor of Comparative Education at the University of Hong Kong, and Seng Bunly, Director of BN Consult in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The authors present their comparative study on financing education and take Cambodia as a case study because of the country's turbulent past and its current difficulties in financing basic education. The book argues that while households have to contribute resources in order to bridge the gaps, government efforts should be made to alleviate the burden on the poorest and to promote accountability between schools and their communities.

This book is a continuation of Mark Bray's 1999 *The Private Costs of Public Schooling: Household and Community Financing of Primary Education in Cambodia*. The 1999 book was based on a survey of household and community costs of education that was commissioned by UNESCO and by UNICEF in conjunction with the MoEYs